

# Reviews

## Why did the SDP fail?

Patricia Lee Sykes, *Losing from the Inside* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Routledge, originally published 1989, republished 2018 as an e-book)

Review by **Michael Meadowcroft**

IT MAY SEEM rather perverse to be reviewing a book first published in 1989 simply because it is newly available as an e-book. It is, however, still an important book with a distinct, some might say idiosyncratic, view of the reasons for the demise of the SDP. Patricia Lee Sykes (Lee Collins now) is an American political scientist at the American University, Washington, who spent two years at Nuffield College, Oxford, studying British politics. Since her first edition in 1989 she has added an epilogue, and I have to declare an interest in that she conducted a long interview with me in the preparation of this final chapter.

In a number of respects the dust of the changes of the merger of the Liberal Party and the SDP and their consequences had not really settled enough to be analysed effectively. One effect of this is that she exaggerates significantly the potential role of the continuing Liberal Party I led for some time. She also suggests, erroneously, that I warned in advance that, without a satisfactory merger agreement, I would start a separate Liberal Party. This was never the case and the continuing party only came about when I and others realised, following the decisions on the merger, that a number of local parties had committed themselves to continuing whatever the national party had agreed and looked to a means of bringing them together. Inevitably, without representation at Westminster, it was a quixotic venture.

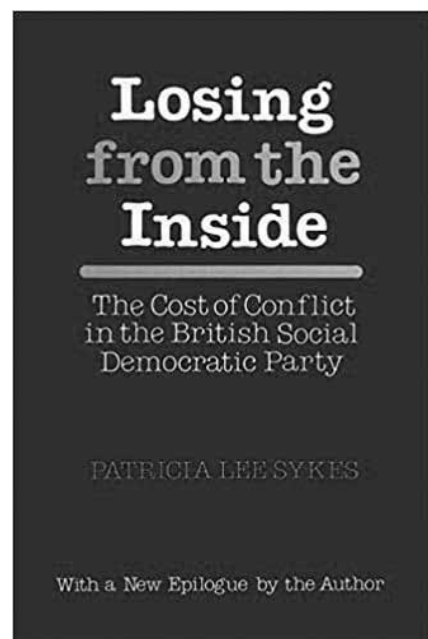
The essential heart of Collins' analysis, and the basis for the book's title, is that the SDP might well have been a young party but was not a 'new' party. Rather it had all the fault lines of the Labour Party out of which it essentially sprang, and it was these

that brought it down. Disagreements between leaders, embarrassing press releases, a lack of clarity on its essential philosophy, a constitution that attempted to keep safeguards in the hands of central officers – and particularly parliamentarians – whilst preaching the importance of member involvement and, in addition, the problem that it could not survive without the Liberal Party but could not survive with it.

Collins sets out carefully all the details of these inherent organic and seemingly irremediable problems and sets them alongside the polling evidence of the damage they caused. It is certainly circumstantially a powerful argument, though there are occasional times when the evidence is squeezed into her overriding thesis with some downplaying of other factors, such as the effect of the Falklands War. One key thread running through this book is the disruptive and ultimately malign role of David Owen. From the beginning he had a very different perception of the place and potential of a new party. What is more he saw himself as its natural leader, which, in fact, was the case but had to take into account other key factors, such as party unity, the necessity of holding party elections for the position and the opinions on him of the Liberal leadership. For the latter's inhibitions Owen had no time at all, not least because he had never wanted any truck with the Liberals, which he regarded as a incubus and a brake on his vision of the political potential of the SDP in its pure form. In a sense he was the SDP equivalent of Paddy Ashdown – for whom, incidentally, Owen had no time at all – but without Paddy's Liberal pluralism and love of argument.

All the way through Collins' narrative is David Owen's disdain for his colleagues in the Gang of Four, his electorally damaging impetuosity when he thought himself traduced, as for instance when, in 1986, David Steel leaked the conclusions of the Alliance's independent Defence Commission, implying that they would demonstrate a defeat for Owen's more hawkish defence line. The grandstanding outbursts of the two leaders led to the 1986 Liberal Assembly defeat for Steel's policy, immediately disowned by Owen and resulting in yet another decline in the Alliance's poll rating. Incidentally, Collins asks why Steel had not got an agreed and sustainable position sorted out with his party before the debate. The answer is that Steel rejected the opportunity. The party's policy committee met with him well in advance and offered him a conciliatory wording that was likely to go through the party assembly – a line which was essentially the same as had to be agreed after the debate – but David Steel rejected it: 'I'm going to go for the high wire act and confront the dissidents.' I remarked that with a high wire act it was important to know how to reach the other side.

A weakness of Collins' book is that she does not make sufficient distinction between Liberal, SDP and Alliance and all too often conflates them



into the jumbo title of 'Alliance' when there were often key nuances, for instance, in the differential poll performances of the two parties. However, her basic thesis is powerful. The SDP would only have been 'new' if it had unified the Gang of Four following its launch and if it had maintained an external unity and a solidarity of approach to leadership and electoral tactics. No democratic party could ever deliver all this – thus, to extent that the fine words of the SDP's launch about a new approach to politics weren't met in practice, so they led to a concomitant level of disillusionment in the public. In addition, to succeed and to maintain its initial high opinion poll rating, it would have needed the full agreement of the Liberal Party to a united approach to the 1983 and 1987 general elections. This was impossible to achieve and, in fact, the SDP from its beginning wholly underestimated the Liberals. It had imbibed the media's caricature of the party as a nice, folksy, diffuse and largely ineffective party, a view often purveyed by David Steel. How on earth the SDP thought that Liberal candidates succeeded in gaining and retaining thousands of seats on local councils and even managing to win any parliamentary seats against all the odds, I do not know; but certainly they were surprised by the toughness and political skills of their Liberal interlocutors.

Collins makes a powerful case that the SDP failed because it exhibited all the inherent faults of the Labour Party, albeit on different issues, that it had found sufficiently distasteful for many MPs to abandon. Perhaps it was inevitable, and it may be that political parties are incapable of avoiding such problems if they are to try and square the circle of assuaging the aspirations of a mass membership with convincing the electorate of its unity and seriousness of purpose.

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## Who are the Liberal Democrats?

Tim Bale, Paul Webb and Monica Poletti, *Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Routledge, 2020)

Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

**V**ERY FEW OF the hundreds of books written each year on British politics ever consider in detail what political parties are really like. This matters: many, perhaps most, political journalists do not really understand who party members and activists are, what they want, and what makes them tick – which leads them to reach conclusions about what parties are likely to do, or should do, which are frequently completely misjudged. This tendency is magnified in the case of the Liberal Democrats, who are far less well studied, and less well understood, than the larger parties.

So Tim Bale, Paul Webb and Monica Poletti's *Footsoldiers* is very welcome. It represents the first in-depth study since the 1990s of the memberships of the UK's three main political parties, and the first ever to look six simultaneously – Labour, the Conservatives, the Scottish National Party, the Liberal Democrats, UK Independence Party and the Greens. Through a combination of membership surveys and in-depth interviews, including with me (all the interviewees' comments are anonymised, but I can recognise a couple of – fairly forthright! – quotes of my own), the book analyses members' social characteristics, attitudes, activities and campaigning, reasons for joining and leaving, and views on how their parties should be run and who should represent them. As the blurb says, 'at a time of great pressure on, and change across parties, this book helps us discover not only what members want out of their parties but what parties want out of their members'.

So what do we learn about Liberal Democrat members? In terms of total numbers, the Liberal Democrats, like Labour and the SNP, appear to have bucked the trend of seemingly inexorable decline in all parties' memberships that had been evident up until roughly the last decade. As readers of the *Journal*

of *Liberal History* will be aware, Liberal Democrat membership sank during the period of coalition government from about 65,000 to about 45,000, but then rose dramatically, in three big jumps – first, immediately after the 2015 catastrophe (as the book puts it, 'rather than leaving a sinking ship when they saw how badly the party had fared at the general election, a significant number of Liberal Democrat sympathisers decided they had to jump on board in order to steady it'), second (and the largest of the three) after the 2016 Brexit referendum, and third (though outside the time period considered by the book) over the local, Euro and general elections of 2019. A similar 'loser's bonus', as the book describes it, benefited Labour after 2015 and the SNP after the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, but for the Liberal Democrats it was also the outcome of a conscious effort, after 2012, to improve the party's membership recruitment and retention systems. The impact of these efforts can be seen in the fact that membership in fact stopped falling in 2014, before the end of the coalition, and was gradually edging upwards before the 2015 election – and it put the party in a much stronger position to capitalise on the 'loser's bonus' after the election and to retain the new members' loyalty in the years that followed.

So who are Liberal Democrat members? In both 2015 and 2017 the party was the most middle-class of the six parties surveyed, both in terms of members (86 per cent and 88 per cent in the ABC1 social classes, respectively) and in terms of voters (70 per cent and 72 per cent). Along with the Greens, Liberal Democrat members and voters are also the most highly educated, with 65 per cent of members, and 39 per cent of voters, having degrees in 2017 (the averages were 51 per cent and 26 per cent). In terms of gender, 32 and 38 per cent of members were women